THE OPERATIONAL CODE OF THE JIHADISTS

A Briefing prepared for the Army Science Board

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Origins of the Idea of a Jihadist Operational Code

- **Why didn't terrorists do the things we could think of?**
- **Why did some terrorists reject certain tactics?**
- **The concept of self-imposed constraints. Terrorist groups had operational codes.**
- **RAND research on al Qaeda**
- **DARPA-sponsored "red team" project**

What Are We Interested In?

- Not a rigorous analytical method, but rather an approach
- What is their worldview, mindset, concept of fighting
- Focuses on elements of their decisionmaking: their objectives, their values, their code of operations
- What counts most? What makes their heart race?
- Why would they do this…or why would they not?

Al Qaeda's World View (1)

- Islam in mortal danger from the West; jihad a duty
- Recent events confirm al Qaeda's interpretation--Americans are the new Mongols:
- U.S. troops still in Saudi Arabia
- U.S. remains in Afghanistan
- U.S. establishing bases in the Middle East, Gulf, Central and South Asia
- Pakistan, America's puppet, has abandoned true path to join the oppressors

Al Qaeda's World View (2)

- U.S. occupies Iraq, threatens Syria, Iran
- Palestine occupied--supported Zionists
- Western corruption threatens Muslim souls
- Jihad is the antidote
- U.S. is thus a threat and an opportunity--hostile to Islam, supports local tyrants, but also provides common enemy and basis for unity
- Action will awaken, demonstrate, instruct, inspire, bring about spiritual revival, foster unity
- A powerful message whose appeal thrives on failure, humiliation, and anger

What Made al Qaeda Unique?

- A common multinational experience in Afghanistan
- Unifying vision (remains)
- Commitment to spectacular violence without limits (unchanged)
- Vast reservoir of potential recruits (still there)
- Availability of safe haven and accessible training camps (now dispersed)
- Large throughput (now may be drawing on capital)
- Ample cash (sufficient)

Briefing bin Laden (1)

- January "State of Islam" message deliberately painted a dark picture--Muslims indeed guilty of substandard zealotry and must be aroused to action
- No doubt, a difficult 30 months.
  Our training camps in Afghanistan have been dismantled
- Some of our top planners killed or captured--this kind of talent is hard to replace
- Thousands of brothers arrested worldwide
- Our cash flow has been squeezed

Briefing bin Laden (2)

- **The infidels occupy Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Bahrain, the Emirates, Qatar and Oman, and threaten Syria**
- **Apostate governments in Jordan, Pakistan, and in Southeast Asia assist the infidels**
- **Our communications have been disrupted**
- **The operational environment remains difficult--transactions are dangerous**
- **Pure Muslims are being persecuted everywhere, but apart from the Palestinians, there have been no uprisings**

Briefing bin Laden (3)

- America's puppets in Kabul and Islamabad hunt us with mercenary tribesmen
- We face capture or martyrdom
- We have been forced to decentralize our operations and must beware of fragmentation and loss of unity
- Zarqawi was second-rate when with us; he roars like a lion in Iraq but may challenge our leadership

These Are Clear Signs That We Are Succeeding! (1)

- We have thus far survived
- Recruits continue to seek to join us (but we must be cautious about infiltrators)
- America's arrogance has alienated many of its allies in Islam and Europe
- Much of our original leadership remains intact--we have survived the infidels' mightiest blows
- We retain a large cadre of loyal dispersed Afghan veterans--sufficient for hundreds of operations
- Financing is adequate to continue operations

These Are Clear Signs That We Are Succeeding! (2)

- **We can communicate publicly and clandestinely**
- **Preparations for further operations continue**
- **Our pace of operations, in fact, has accelerated in the past 30 months. We carried out 12 major successful terrorist operations**
- **The shadow of 9-11 still hangs over America's economy**
- **Most importantly, we have demonstrated our faith, our courage, our prowess which will cleanse our souls, inspire the Muslim world and demonstrate our worthiness before God**

America's Invasion of Iraq Is a Gift (1)

- America's invasion split the infidels and has provoked the community
- America's quick military "victory" has put its soldiers where they are vulnerable to the kind of warfare we can wage--Iraq will be America's Afghanistan!
- It opens a new front for jihad
- It will provide a new radicalizing, bonding experience for hundreds of young recruits
- Our cadres will gain valuable field experience

America's Invasion of Iraq Is a Gift (2)

- How long can the Americans stay? It took a decade to convince the Soviets, but American's have even less spine or stomach for losses. Will they last until 2013 with 6,000 dead?
- Once they depart to live in angry isolation, chaos will ensue in Iraq giving jihad new space
- The apostate regimes of the Gulf will tremble and fall
- The Holy Land will again be ours, and with its oil wealth we will force the West to abandon Israel--the three Holy places will be ours--to be united under a mighty caliphate

To Survive in the Vanguard of Jihad, al Qaeda Must: (1)

- **Reconfigure itself to operate in more hostile environment**
- **Protect its surviving top leadership**
- **Find a secure base**
- **Develop a functioning command and control capability able to operate in clandestinity**
- **Continue to communicate with operatives, recruiters, volunteers, constituents**

To Survive in the Vanguard of Jihad, al Qaeda Must: (2)

- **Collect and disburse funds**
- **Inspire followers with words and deeds**
- **Demonstrate that it can still strike**
- **Continue recruiting--Iraq War and Palestinian situation offer opportunities**

Operations Are Imperative

- **Without a continuing terrorist campaign, Osama bin Laden is yesterday's bogeyman--a picture on a T-shirt**
- **Contributors won't support inactive organization (why do they contribute?)**
- **Recruits will go elsewhere (action is a recruiting poster)**
- **Ensure branding**

Al Qaeda's Current Dilemmas

- Has a dedicated core sufficient for continued operations, but endless repetition of Riyadhs and Istanbuls will not shake Americans--eventually needs another 9-11, but can be patient
- May still have talented planners at the center, but harder for them to recruit directly and supervise operations
- Local planners may or may not have talent--quality control may suffer (but look at Madrid)
- Cannot sustain a surge--can only hit and hide

Still the Jihadists Could Get Lucky--the Environment Can Change

- **Afghanistan could slip back into chaos**
- **Musharef could be killed or overthrown, Pakistan could fly apart, or go to war with India**
- **Iraqi resistance to occupation could continue to bog U.S. down in bloody pacification**
- **Saudi Arabia could become increasingly unstable**

Remember the Tri-continental?

- **Inspired by Cuban Revolution and with Cuban support, representatives of revolutionary governments and movements met in Havana in 1966**
- **Objective: global revolution**
- **No global movement resulted and many groups wiped out**
- **Cuban role varied from movement to movement, generally faded**
- **But Marxist-driven guerrilla warfare and terrorism continued for decades**

Why No Attacks on American Soil Since 9-11? (1)

- **Another attack remains an ambition**
- **The jihadists lack capability?**
- **Improved intelligence and security measures have made operation environment too difficult?**
- **They certainly could do something**
- **Anything below 9-11 scale would appear feeble**
- **They are patient--8 years between '93 WTC bombing and 9-11**

Why No Attacks on American Soil Since 9-11? (2)

- **They are exploiting opportunities in Iraq right now?**
- **Locals won't act without approval?**
- **There is local community pressure against action?**
- **Al Qaeda has declared war but not called for BYOB jihad?**
- **Or they have and no one showed up yet?**
- **Free lance jihad is dangerous for al Qaeda.**
- **Attacks could be counter-productive, dismissed as crazy**

Why No Attacks on American Soil Since 9-11? (3)

- **If al Qaeda planning (or has ambitions for) another big one, a lesser attack now would make it more difficult--attack when the enemy is inattentive**
- **Local recruits instructed to prepare themselves--a crackdown is expected**
- **A strategy of "many Madrids?"**

Al Qaeda's Future Models: the Issue Is Connectivity

- **A restructured al Qaeda**
- **A decentralized al Qaeda**
- **A splintered al Qaeda**
- **Leaderless resistance**

A Restructured al Qaeda (1)

- Osama bin Laden remains inspirational figure and architect
- Leaner command in a safe location
- New operational planners--less international travel, greater emphasis on clandestinity
- Salaried bureaucracy replaced by handful of regional or country reps
- Afghan vets remain core
- Few true sleepers replace many acorns
- Training sites dispersed, isolated but closer to recruiting

A Restructured al Qaeda (2)

- Reduced cash flow, moves entirely through informal network, sufficient to support operations
- Communications reduced, mainly Internet, indirect, encoded
- Pre-9-11 scenarios (stuck to old playbook?)
- But looking at alternatives
- Shorter time horizons
- Remote operations
- Greater use of locals; trusted members recruit friends for operations--all conspiracies are intimate
- Rough coordination in surges

A Decentralized al Qaeda

- Osama bin Laden and Zawahiri remain inspirational figures, exhort rather than direct
- Centrally-run operational planners largely disappear
- Recruiters play greater role in operations
- Local training of recruits
- Local planning, little input from the center (Casa Blanca, Madrid)
- Local funding more important
- Largely local operations
- Imitate al Qaeda's M.O.

A Splintered al Qaeda

- Al Qaeda breaks into rival entities like Palestinians
- But affiliates continue as before
- Bin Laden, dead or alive, reduced to source of inspiration
- Coordinating role of al Qaeda becomes fictional veneer
- Funds collected and disbursed locally
- Recruiters play increasing role in operations

"Leaderless" Resistance Is a Lousy Model for al Qaeda (1)

- Al Qaeda identifies itself as a dedicated elite
- Premise of al Qaeda's terrorism: Islam to be galvanized by action, not left alone--premise of all terrorism
- Contrary to al Qaeda's warrior code
- Recruits seek, demand action--without action, what is al Qaeda?
- Deprives al Qaeda of central voice, justification for finance
- Leaderless resistance runs risk of no response--center must ensure action

"Leaderless" Resistance Is a Lousy Model for al Qaeda (2)

- Indication of failure--not attractive organizational model
- Leaderless resistance only useful in allowing toothless ideologues to claim credit for disparate acts
- Leaderless resistance adjunct not substitute
- Unconnected acts not evidence of leaderless resistance--always unconnected acts
- Compared to bin Laden, how many know Louis Beam?

Al Qaeda Think

- **Allah does grand strategy**
- **Strategic objectives do not dictate specific actions--the objective is action**
- **Not what does it do to them but what does it do for us?**
- **Harness local commitment to global struggle--goal is unification**

Different Views of Jihadist "Strategy"

- **Jihad as insurgency: al Qaeda needs to control a state (or, at least portion of a state) as a safe base**
- **Jihad as a mission: al Qaeda is process, not progress-oriented; its mission is to keep fighting to be worthy of Allah--only he will award victory**
- **In the latter view, commitment to "strategy" is weak; political aims are opportunistic recruiting appeals**

Some Planning Characteristics

- Long planning horizons, patient
- Persistence--a preferred target not easily abandoned (World Trade Center)
- Al Qaeda learns, perfects (boat bombs)
- Stick to familiar playbooks, core competencies, centers of excellence
- Imaginative low-tech over challenging high-tech (box-cutters, ricin)
- Operations planning is de-centralized, and therefore entrepreneurial
- Proposals start big, then back off (can't do the American embassy, can't do the Brooklyn Bridge)

Nature of al Qaeda Planning

- Instruction in training camps provides generic scenarios and know-how
- Al Qaeda's history, real and claimed, provides examples
- May also order reconnaissance of specific targets
- Our public concerns may add new ideas
- Operatives scout targets, submit proposed projects; may propose alternatives to AQ suggestions
- *Operational planning not driven by strategy but rather by need for continued action; not, how do we do this, but what can we do*

What Are al Qaeda's Criteria?

- **Target has symbolic value**
- **Action(s) will demonstrate al Qaeda's capacity--showmanship (for example, multiple attacks, multiple locations, blows in enemy's heartland, powerful weapons)--*action is the objective!***
- **Action will produce quantum of terror**
- **Element of surprise**
- **Lucrative: body count, spectacular destruction, economic impact**
- **Feasible: high cost of failure (al Qaeda's tolerance?)**
- **There are some constraints**

Operational Considerations

- Accessibility--level of security
- Access to inside information--Limberg
- Physical requirements--tools, weapons, quantities of explosives
- Money required--probably not a constraint
- Volunteers for one-way missions--not a pre-requisite
- Reliable people

What Are the Sources of the Jihadists' Operational Code?

- **Islam**
- **Patterns of pre-Islamic warfare**
- **Tribal warfare in Arab world, Central Asia**
- **Selected history and myth (Saladin, assassins, etc.)**
- **Current circumstances**
- **Terrorist tactics observed and discussed**
- **Their own playbook**

Elements of Pre-Islamic Tribal Warfare

- Warfare continuous
- Scarce resources preclude long military campaigns
- Warfare comprises a series of isolated raids for plunder or revenge
- Rules of engagement limit destruction to reduce the risk of devastating response--a kind of mutual deterrence
- Prowess brings victories which bring power

The Assassins

- **A weapons system based upon religious dedication**
- **Focus on leaders, not population**
- **Acts, not campaigns**

Other Sources

- Tribal warfare in Northwest Pakistan, Afghanistan--the ambush, the raid are opportunities for heroism
- Islam-inspired uprisings--an inspirational leader, self-sacrificing hordes, large-scale ambushes, attack irresistible

Is Islam a Source of Operational Doctrine?

- **Unalterable law of Allah and Sunna are source of instruction**
- **Religion more than justification for war, source of moral support, or basis for regulating conflict--it is the basis for governmental organization, law, and it guides "military" planning**
- **Not just why one fights, but also how one fights**

Elements of Warfare According to Islam (1)

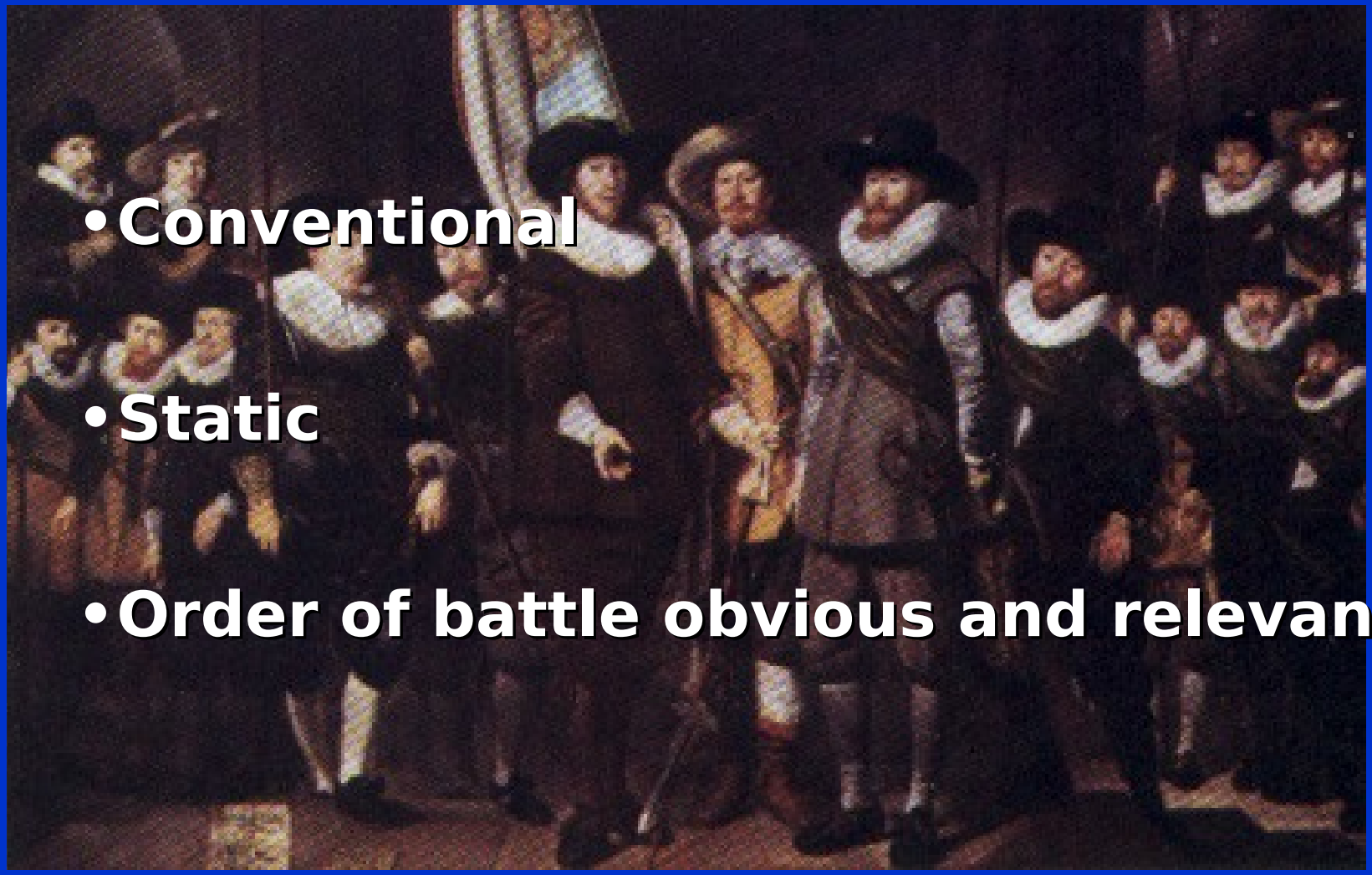
- Koran and Hadiths have a lot to say about jihad and warfare
- Concept of jihad subject to interpretation
- Much reflects style of pre-Islamic warfare on Arabian Peninsula
- Views war as perpetual condition--not finite undertaking
- Views fighting as a religious obligation
- Fighting morally assists the combatant, galvanizes the Islamic community, fosters unity
- Benefits of warfare are individual and internal

Elements of Warfare According to Islam (2)

- Envisages raids, battles, isolated engagements, not campaigns
- Battle is an opportunity to demonstrate depth of beliefs through courage and sacrifice--must attack heroically--individual heroism more important than outcome
- Lie in wait, beleaguer enemy, attack when inattentive, make life untenable
- Consistent with terrorism
- Victory sometimes achieved magically--a "handful of pebbles"
- Does not envisage continued, large-scale operations

Elements of Warfare According to Islam (3)

- Does not offer a linear strategy as Prussian general staff or Pentagon would understand
- Allah is the strategist
- God manipulates the battle
- If not fighting each other, unity will release tremendous energy to dominate
- Failure is humiliation--success in combat brings great honor
- Extol heroes who sacrifice all
- Great reward for those killed in battle



- Conventional
- Static
- Order of battle obvious and relevant

Moving Toward A . . .

- Less predictable
- More diverse
- More dynamic
- More fluid

Set of foes creating new demands on intelligence